

For Fluency's Sake: The Effect of Lesson Preparedness on Fluency Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an observation of a lower level discussion group class and their performances in a fluency activity. This paper describes an observational journal which monitored the students' ability to successfully take part in and complete a fluency activity. Whilst conducting this semester observation and in reaction to the behaviors exhibited by the students, I implemented week by week measures to improve performances and ensuing controls to reduce poor classroom conduct. During this process I found that this was an ideal opportunity to foster a sense of shared effort and teamwork and contrastingly an opportune moment to encourage the students to take more responsibility for their own lesson readiness.

INTRODUCTION

In Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC), first year instructors are tasked with keeping a reflective journal as part of a program of professional development. This journal task presented an interesting challenge – to analyze an aspect of learner behavior in an EDC lesson that needed particular attention. During the first and second weeks of term I quickly decided upon the focus of my journal and the possible intervening roles that I myself could perform in order to correct that particular area of learner behavior. Over the subsequent eight weeks in observation of the class I found keeping the reflective journal quite an illuminating process and I constantly assessed how I could best react to the changes in learner behavior.

The focus of the journal was to observe the students' performance during the fluency activity as a general indicator of lesson preparedness. The fluency activity is typically conducted at the start of an EDC class and immediately after a homework quiz. Approximately 5 minutes into the lesson the students are expected to stand-up, speak for 3, 2 and then 1 minute on the prompts provided and connected to the context of the lesson. It soon became apparent that this was a potential pitfall for lower Level IV learners and more specifically, students that were unprepared for the lesson. Whilst there are a multitude of mitigating factors that can be attributed to poor performances in the fluency task – anxiety, motivation and more broadly willingness to communicate, I identified and proposed that there was a link between consistent low scores in the quiz - directly impacting upon their ability to spontaneously produce language.

I decided to focus upon a lower Level IV EDC class mostly comprising of sports team members. The students appeared to be familiar with each other - either through their circle or possibly through their university classes. During the first three weeks and after observing the students' participation more generally over the full ninety minutes of the lesson, I observed frequent cases of intermittent and unrelated chat in Japanese during activities, codeswitching in discussions rather than using the applicable communication skills to negotiate meaning as a group, forgotten textbooks, no pens or materials and even periodic text/cell phone use whilst the students didn't think I would notice. At this juncture I perceived that these exhibits of student behaviour accumulated to a general apathy toward the English discussion class - thus most likely feeding back into and resulting in the neglect of homework and lesson preparation.

DISCUSSION

Lessons 4 and 5 EDC expects...

After observing the particular dynamic of the class during Lessons 1-3, I proceeded to implement some stricter controls with the aim to reaffirm the course expectations and furthermore to try to foster a sense of a team spirit amongst the students – after all, the fact that they were present in class on a Saturday morning was something to start with. I addressed the issue of the homework after the quiz was completed and then asked the students to tell each other how much time they usually spend reading for the class. I monitored from a distance and made notes, the students seemed to think it was an assessed activity and I in turn allowed them to think that. I emphasized the importance of lesson preparation in a mini feedback and the necessity to spend more time on the homework. It is fair to say that the class, comprising of sports team (mostly baseball) members, from time to time may appreciate a sterner and firmer explanation of their direction – and in this case, I was confident the message was received and acknowledged.

Scaffold and Collaborate and Listen

Scaffolding became the first step toward providing the students with more ammunition for the fluency task. The homework reading – a solitary task, did not appear, in this class context, to dovetail with the ensuing fluency task. At this stage I considered how to better forge a collaborative preparatory task and to initiate a sense of teamwork amongst the students. The teacher, in order to achieve this has to implement opportunities for team-building (Kagan, 1994) and realize and foster a sense of shared care for all learners amongst themselves (Moskovitz, 1978). Achieving a sense of community or cooperation was hopefully a step in the right direction – fully underlining the importance on interaction between learners – and emphasizing peer support and coaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The students themselves had an opportunity to support each other as a listener – as Nation (2009, p153) highlights, a key component of a successful fluency activity is where “there is support and encouragement for the learner to perform at a higher level”.

I decided to do this by using the board and offering some prompts to stimulate some ideas. The students collaborated together in a fluency preparation task and their utterances were recorded on the board on a spider gram. The rationale for this was that the students performing the speaking role during the 3/2/1 had a clear site of the board with their ideas as a constant reference point and also they were able to maintain eye contact with the listener rather than stare blankly at their text or preparation worksheet. Post turns I emphasized time urgency and asked for more energy (even though it was 9.10 am). Positive content feedback post turns seemed to further motivate the students and maintain a more ‘productive’ atmosphere to the task a whole. The students seemed to respond to the more ‘teacher managed’ task and took more action upon themselves to commit to completing the fluency fully. At the end of the lesson I made a note to compliment the students on the better effort they had made in the fluency and how this can have an effect on the quality of their discussions. I brought back to their attention their homework duties in anticipation of Lesson 5.

Discussion Test 1

Lesson 5 saw an improved effort on the quiz – coupled with the same post quiz idea collaboration and scaffolding for the fluency, the students performed the 3-2-1 activity with fewer breakdowns and with fewer repetitions. Immediately prior to starting the fluency I decided to add to the pre-task by modelling a speaking turn for about 30 seconds with the hope that this would provide the students with an immediate ‘jumping off point’ on the first turn. Building on the improvements made, positive feedback was given in order to further cultivate a community for learning (or

persevering). At that time and from my own viewpoint, as long as the students were continuing to take more responsibility for themselves and collaborating with each other in order to successfully complete the fluency activity, then I felt that some good progress had been made. However, I was apprehensive that these small achievements were indeed influenced by the timing of the discussion test. Would the positive momentum carry over in to week 6 and beyond?

Lessons 6-7 And now for something completely different...

As I had feared, after their first discussion test, the students for Lesson 6 had again neglected to prepare for class and upon asking the students if they had read their homework after checking the quiz scores (which none of them had) I made a note to implement *plan B* at the end of the lesson in feedback.

The fluency activity lacked the energy and purposefulness that had been generated and exhibited in Lessons 4 and 5. To maintain consistency, I again used the fluency pre-task – collaborate-scaffold and model. At this stage of the course I certainly became aware that this particular class needed either to prepare for the fluency by conscientiously completing the reading or by eliciting ideas and thoroughly scaffolding the task – for which there was no time in the lesson to be able to do so. The students were unable (or reluctant) to make efforts to ‘take the plunge’ and speak with spontaneity for the fluency task.

The back-up plan, as mentioned - was to give the students another reason to read the homework. I pre-empted that the students may not be as committed to the lesson as they were prior to the first discussion test and in turn I prepared for this outcome. I suggested a YouTube clip for them to watch on the way to class for the next week. I explained that this could be done on the train or bus to and from campus and watched at their own will. It would also give them some fresh ideas in preparation for the fluency. Also by watching the clip the animated information on advertising it would help the students better understand the reading by giving them a visual image of the issues raised in the homework. Did the students find the reading difficult or were they simply disinterested? I proposed that these factors were not mutually exclusive. The process of reading incorporates the identification of the genre, formal structure and topic all of which activate schemata and allow readers to comprehend the text (Swales, 1990, p. 89). By activating such schemata, the students, I hoped, would be better able to take part in the fluency whereby “all the language items are within their previous experience” (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 152). I made it clear, it was an optional activity – but would only serve to help their fluency skills for the following lesson.

Lesson 7 began with the students in class before the chime exchanging comments about the YouTube clip they had watched, as the lesson began they were talking about the topic and I hoped that this would transition into a good fluency activity. The quiz results again remained consistent (low) however the students were able to complete a productive fluency activity by listing a variety of ideas. I approached the task by again, using the same pre-task preparation. The students were certainly providing plenty of details and ideas – however, in order to install more of a narrative to their speaking turn I encouraged the speakers to use the functions of reasons and examples.

Post class and in feedback I again suggested a video clip for the students to watch and to supplement their reading. The clip was a personality test – and I thought that by ‘personalizing’ the context of the lesson the students will bring some of their own life experiences to the reading thus developing a more coherent understanding of the text through an interactive process of combining textual information with the reader” (Widdowson in Grabe, 1988, p. 56). Furthermore, as Harmer states “It is probably most useful to see acts of reading and listening (as well as speaking and writing) as interactions between top-down and bottom-up processing” (2007,

p. 270). I wasn't sure if the clip and the visual element had stimulated topic schemata but it certainly aided the activity and I felt that this change of gear would further propel the students toward creating a more of a community of learning, not only in the classroom but outside – in preparation for their EDC class.

Lessons 8-9 Better Call SALL

By week eight a familiar pattern had emerged, the students had not been completing the homework as conscientiously as they could have done and the fluency activity had to be fully supplemented and scaffolded in order to set a productive start to the lesson. The students again, checked the YouTube clip before the lesson had started and they also mentioned that they had watched it outside of the classroom in preparation. I canvassed the class as to who had done the pre-lesson reading - to which all of the students said they had, this was a surprising answer as all of the students (bar one) had scored one in the quiz. Since the changes made to the fluency activity were implemented - the low quiz scores did not appear to correlate to the performances in the fluency task.

I noted that the students during the fluency in Lesson 8 were not taking the task as seriously as they should have. This may have been in part due to the element of 'play' introduced with the use of their smartphones as an aid outside of class. The class had a particular characteristic – comprising mostly of sports/baseball team members. I observed that the listeners in the task were not particularly interested in the speaker or began to look away at other friends. I decided to reset expectations of what is good classroom behavior. The baseball boys took their rather informal 'dressing down' and attempted the rest of the activity with more commitment and gusto. Once this small hurdle was negotiated - the students were now encouraging each other to speak more, with fewer gaps and or repetition. It was now possible to complete a full 3/2/1 and their utterances were recorded and boarded in order to aid the subsequent discussion preparation tasks. At the end of the lesson I encouraged the students to have a more active role in their lesson preparation by using their smartphones to search for ideas connected to the lesson topic - hoping that this would increase better collaboration in the classroom and more autonomy out of class. Littlewood (1999) in a study on East Asian learners proposed that reactive autonomy – an organizational step toward proactive individual decision making, may be more prevalent amongst such students. Thus giving the students staged prompts toward self-access learning and better lesson preparation.

Lesson 9 Déjà vu... Test 2

Upon taking a straw poll in lesson nine, the students all admitted they had both researched the topic of fashion and fashion pressures and also completed their homework reading. The successful fluency activity was completed as previously scaffolded, modeled and now standardized. More generally a pattern had begun to emerge during the test lessons – of better test scores, increased efforts in the fluency activity and the lesson as a whole. It could be argued that the students' motivations were, for the most part, extrinsic rather than resultative of the previous successes in the fluency task.

Lessons 10-13. The Final Countdown

I approached the last three lessons before the final discussion test as I had done in Lessons 8 and 9. The students were familiarized with the pre-fluency tasks and optional smartphone lesson topic preparation. I felt that at this stage in the course I had sufficiently observed the students' behavior and in an eventful thirteen weeks I had implemented tasks and controls in order to achieve a better outcome for the students for the fluency task.

CONCLUSION

In summary this reflective journal has outlined some of the potential pitfalls of conducting a complete and successful fluency activity with a class of lower level students. The behavior which appeared to hinder and impinge upon the fluency activity was not that of anxiety or willingness to communicate but of a general lack of preparation for the lesson. I found that throughout my journal observations my responses to learner behavior were formed retrospectively and recorded for action - in anticipation of the lesson ahead (Murphy, 2014).

The journal observations helped me to develop and implement a scaffolded pre-task model for the fluency - not by changing the fluency activity itself, but by building upon and reacting to successes and failures of the task on a weekly basis. The three step model of scaffold with board-work, collaborate in pairs and model the start of a speaking turn appeared to improve performances in the activity and also seemed to foster a collaborative, teamwork ethic amongst the students.

The use of smartphones and using YouTube out of class as an aid to the reading and to further stimulate ideas for fluency may well have had a positive effect on the students' readiness for the lesson. Going forward it might be interesting to see the impact of these issues in SLA. As suggested by Kietzmann et al. (2013, p. 294) "Mobility is on the rise and mobile communities of practice are here to stay". Finally, by adapting to the learners' needs and by offering the students a choice to aid and supplement their curricula homework activities, I hope that the reflective journal and subsequent pedagogical adjustments have advanced a sense of active autonomy and responsibility for not only the students' lesson preparation but the impact that has on the group as a whole.

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